Laziness in lotus land : Hélio Oiticica and the notion of crelazer

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ORTO

òrto – noun [lat. hŏrtus]

The Italian word for a small or medium plot of land, often next to or around a house, enclosed by wall or hedge, in which vegetables, fruit and flowers are grown. In certain literary uses and some specific cases, it is equivalent, as already in Latin, to “garden” (lat. hortus).

Laziness in Lotus Land: Hélio Oiticica and the Notion of *Crelazer*

Charlotte Matter

Some considerations on the politics of leisure, the place of children and play, and what parrots have to tell us, proceeding from the back of a garden during lockdown in 2020 and looking back at an artwork from the late 1960s.

I was reading Susan Sontag's essay on "The Aesthetics of Silence" from 1967 during lockdown.[1] *It was actually a mere coincidence, related to an article I was writing on refusal and withdrawals from art around 1968, whose deadline—already passed—was bearing down on me. (Should I just refuse, like the artists I was writing about, and withdraw from the publication? But in my case, there would be no PhD candidate to later ponder over my never-written essay and reflect how my refusal was, in fact, a brave political act of dissent, contesting the pressure of having to be productive under a state of emergency, and the challenge of writing a thesis while caring for a toddler. In the end, I finished the essay.)*

After a couple of weeks into so-called "home office," I came to realize it wasn't going to work if I kept on secretly working while I pretended to play with my son. He doesn't like that at all, and I get it. He's really serious about his playing, in fact. His favorites are the pans in the kitchen. He takes them out of the cupboard, opens and closes the lids, puts stuff inside (preferably his shoes). He always seems to have a plan. So I take my cue from him. I stop pretending to be able to multitask—I never was—and I dedicate myself fully to the pots and pans when I'm with him. (I ordered some wax crayons and tried reading stories to him, but nothing compares. I wonder whether he knows of the pots and pans that people are banging to applaud the frontline workers.[2]*)*

We ordered some games to play in the garden. We are self-conscious about our privileged situation as fellow artists and academics residing in a villa, and we make fun of ourselves playing badminton like the contessa probably used to (or perhaps not, maybe she was indulging in weird and wicked activities such as chasing butterflies), but we do it nevertheless. Some may experience the quarantine as something romantic, but for many others, lack of freedom shapes their very quotidian.

There are two parrots in a cage in the back of the garden, where the turtles live and eat the rest of the salad that wasn't popular at lunch. I didn't notice them until the lockdown. It's quite ironic actually, given that I spent months thinking and writing about parrots for my thesis a few years back. My topic was Hélio Oiticica's Tropicália—an iconic artwork, exhibited twice during the artist's lifetime, first in Rio de Janeiro (1967) and then in a second, adapted version in London (1969)—whose most striking

1 Susan Sontag, "The Aesthetics of Silence" [1967], in *Styles of Radical Will* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1969), 3–34.

2 Several commentators have questioned the relevance of such gestures as long as care workers remain largely overlooked and underpaid. See, for instance, Sophia Akram, "Don't clap for our carers tonight—it means nothing when the government is failing them so badly," in *The Independent*, May 21, 2020, https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/coronavirus-clap-for-carers-ppe-shortage-boris-johnson-nhs-a9525596.html (accessed June 25, 2020). The ambivalence of such actions in relation to the construction of the hero figure is also discussed in this present book by Francesco Dendena and Kiri Santer, 86–107, 99–101.

feature, in my view, were two live parrots that had been widely overlooked in the otherwise abundant scholarship.

My urge to look again at Oiticica's work presently, in the midst of a pandemic, had to do with the fact that many of the experiences we were having somehow resonated with circumstances and ideas he had addressed in his practice. These were feelings of estrangement and exclusion (paired with the guilt of living in a hyper-privileged, safely secluded environment); the expectation to be disciplined and productive, almost redoubled now in the sick and inscrutable ways of capitalism (after all, wasn't there less distraction these days and more time to work?); the consternation in the face of the commodification of literally everything, when the targeted ads that popped up on our screens were for complete funerals at the price of € 1250 all included; the need for catharsis through bodily experiences—excessive jogging at first, until many, like me, injured their knee (soon after, parks were closed anyway), followed by a lot of drinking, before suddenly everybody started to diet or fast. There was also this longing for tenderness, togetherness and idle hours, which seemed to echo the idea of Crelazer that Oiticica developed around 1969 as a means to engage in pleasure and "non-sense leisure," or, in his own words, as an "unconditional way to battle oppressive systematic ways of life."[3]

3 Hélio Oiticica, "The Senses Pointing Towards a New Transformation" (June 1969), unpublished manuscript, AHO/PHO 0486.69, 3.

Fig. 1:
Hélio Oiticica, *Tropicália*, 1967. Installation view, Museu de Arte Moderna, Rio de Janeiro. © Projeto Hélio Oiticica archive, Rio de Janeiro.

Fig 2:
Presentation of a dress by Solange Escosteguy inside Hélio Oiticica's *Tropicália* in Rio de Janeiro, from Marisa Alves de Lima, "Moda em vanguarda," *A Cigarra* 53, no. 9, September 1967, photograph by Alexandre Baratta. © Projeto Hélio Oiticica archive, Rio de Janeiro.

In 1967, Hélio Oiticica mounted *Tropicália* at the Museu de Arte Moderna in Rio de Janeiro for the exhibition *Nova Objetividade Brasileira* (New Brazilian Objectivity), a group show he had conceived and organized together with other artists and art critics. The black and white installation view of *Tropicália* (fig. 1) depicts a square structure in the middle of a room, constructed from wooden slats, whose outer walls are covered with dark and light fabric. Behind it, there is a second structure; sand and pebbles on the ground, piled up to a small heap on the left; various potted plants arranged to both sides of the structure; and in the above foreground, a few paper sheets, either blank or shown from behind, fastened on a cord as if hanging from a clothesline to dry. This is how the one installation view that has been reproduced over and over frames the work's first installment in Rio.[4]

An entirely different picture unfolds, however, when looking at a series of photographs that were made within *Tropicália* for a women's magazine, preserved at the archive of the Projeto Hélio Oiticica (fig. 2). Loud, colorful, improvised and untidy, shrill like a parrot—what is indeed hidden from view in the first, quite sober image, are two rather unusual items in a museum: a pair of large, live macaws. (At this point, it is worth pointing out that macaws are loud birds. Being social animals, they vocalize often. According to wikiHow Pet, you can teach them to talk rather than scream, but it takes time. Also, they will match the sound level of their home, and become increasingly loud in a noisy surrounding.[5]) The fashion spread, titled "Moda em vanguarda" (Avantgarde Fashion), featured clothing designed by Solange Escosteguy, another artist in the exhibition, presented by three mannequins interacting with Oiticica's work. In fact, Oiticica initially conceived of *Tropicália* as a sort of stage that would include the works of other artists. (For different reasons, however, only some poem-objects by Roberta Salgado and a work by Antonio Manuel were included in the end.[6])

The playful and collaborative aspects of the installation in Rio, in which the macaws were significantly *not* locked up in a cage—what is visible in the fashion spread was largely neglected in the subsequent art historical reception, either due to their visual absence from the canonical installation view, or in a conscious effort to exclude the "trivial" tropical elements that seemed to endanger the work's criticality.[7] Yet the representation of *Tropicália* as a lively, open space for interaction that offers room for other artists, would be, as far as I am concerned, much more appropriate than the strict, uncolored, deserted image.

Given its architectural elements, *Tropicália* has been principally read in connection with the immediate surroundings of the polis (the "asphalt jungle") rather than the

4 In cases where not this picture is shown, the images used are either from the second version of the work, installed two years after in London, or from later posthumous remakes, sometimes causing confusion due to incorrect or incomplete dating.

5 https://www.wikihow.pet/Know-if-a-Macaw-Is-Right-for-You (accessed May 31, 2020).

6 While Salgado's poem-objects are pictured in the fashion spread, Manuel's contribution, which apparently consisted of tabloid images presented on a counter, is documented only in writing. See Hélio Oiticica, "Block Experiments in Cosmococa—Program in Progress" (March 1974), typewritten manuscript, online archive Programa Hélio Oiticica, PHO 0301/74, 4. See also the email exchange with Manuel quoted in Sérgio Bruno Martins, *Constructing an Avant-Garde: Art in Brazil, 1949–1979* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2013), 67 and 210, note 71.

7 The decision to always use the photograph without the parrots seems deliberate, given that a series of further black-and-white installation views in medium format are preserved in the archive of the Projeto Hélio Oiticica in Rio de Janeiro, some of which depict the macaws. They were finally reproduced in *Hélio Oiticica: To Organize Delirium*, ed. Lynn Zelevansky, Elisabeth Sussman, James Rondeau, and Donna De Salvo with Anna Katherine Brodbeck (Munich: Prestel, 2016), 29. Published in conjunction with the exhibition at the Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh, October 1, 2016–January 2, 2017, The Art Institute of Chicago, February 19–May 7, 2017, and the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, July 14–October 1, 2017.

actual rainforest, and more particularly—with a view to the makeshift, improvised constructions made from reclaimed materials—in relation to the favela.[8]

Oiticica was introduced to the samba school of the Mangueira favela in 1964 by the sculptor Jackson Ribeiro. He befriended some of its residents and learned to dance, yearning to belong. Many of his works from that time are in fact dedicated to, or titled after, members of its community and photographed with them. The artist also notoriously invited musicians and dancers from Mangueira to wear his series of *Parangolé* capes for their first presentation at the Museu de Arte Moderna in 1965, leading to their being denied access from the museum.[9] And he created an explicit connection to *Tropicália* by juxtaposing the installation view from the MAM-Rio with a photograph of Mangueira by Desdémone Bardin in the catalog for his first major solo exhibition abroad, at the London Whitechapel Gallery in 1969.[10]

But "Hélio couldn't dance," as Michael Asbury has noted, addressing the romanticizing implications of the favela topos and the overwhelming tendency to emphasize the artist's involvement with Mangueira.[11] Coming from a privileged background, Oiticica did not actually belong to the favela—though he resolutely identified with being an outsider, certainly not least from his experience of queerness under the military dictatorship. In fact, Oiticica may have reflected his own otherness on a further spread of the Whitechapel catalog. Next to a photograph from Claude Lévi-Strauss' *Tristes tropiques* (1955), depicting a funeral dance by the Paiwe clan, another picture shows children at a samba rehearsal in Mangueira, and a third image depicts a friend of Oiticica wearing his *Parangolé Cape 2* (1964). Illustrated side by side, the dancing people imply a common thread—despite the striking disparity of their contexts—between rituals in the rural hinterlands, everyday life in the urban favela, and the artistic practice of Oiticica. This juxtaposition is problematic if understood as a glorification of "authenticity" in ethnographic photographs from the first half of the 20th century, or as a romanticization of precarity, but it can also be read as an ironic and self-reflective way of addressing and deconstructing the stranger's gaze: Just as the French ethnologist Lévi Strauss observes the rituals of the indigenous population of Brazil, so does Oiticica contemplate the favela with a mixture of fascination and estrangement, and so does the Western art world possibly look at his art.

While Oiticica understood *Tropicália* as a kind of 'favela' underdeveloped atmosphere," as he noted in the Whitechapel catalog, he also—and actually prior to this afterthought in parentheses—described it as a "tropical garden with alive birds (Arara ararauna), plants, etc."[12] Yet the favored

8 Michael Asbury for instance describes *Tropicália* as an "anti-monument" that formulates a national identity of underdevelopment in contrast to the belief in progress of Brazilian modernism. Michael Asbury, "Changing Perceptions of National Identity in Brazilian Art and Modern Architecture," in *Transculturation: Cities, Spaces and Architectures in Latin America*, ed. Felipe Hernández, Mark Millington, and Iain Borden, Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2005, 59–75, 72.

9 For a discussion of the *Parangolés* and their deployment in public events, see Monica Amor and Carlos Basualdo, "Hélio Oiticica, Apocalipopótese (1968)," *The Artist as Curator*, no. 8, ed. Elena Filipovic, supplement to *Mousse*, no. 49 (Summer 2015), 3–16.

10 The analogy is underscored in that both pictures are printed in black and white and no people are visible on them, suggesting a formal similarity between the precarious dwellings. Hélio Oiticica, *Hélio Oiticica*, published in conjunction with the exhibition at the Whitechapel Gallery, London, February 25–April 6, 1969 (London: Whitechapel Gallery, 1969), 20–21. This visual connection is reiterated textually in the accompanying essay by Guy Brett. Ibid, 27–30, 28.

11 Michael Asbury, "O Hélio não Tinha Ginga (Hélio Couldn't Dance)," in *Fios Soltos*, ed. Paula Braga (São Paulo: Perspectiva 2008), 52–65. This issue is also problematized in Sérgio Bruno Martins, "Hélio Oiticica: Mapping the Constructive," *Third Text* 24, no. 4 (July 2010), 409–422, 417–418.

12 Hélio Oiticica, *Hélio Oiticica*, published in conjunction with the exhibition at the Whitechapel Gallery, London, February 25–April 6, 1969 (London: Whitechapel Gallery, 1969), 34.

reading of *Tropicália* has been to cast it as an expression of the "Aesthetics of Hunger" along the lines of Glauber Rocha's groundbreaking manifesto of 1965, which asserted that art needed to make poverty visible in order to bring about a revolutionary act, as opposed to repeating colonial power relations by satisfying the European viewer's longing for the "primitive."[13] This, in turn, has caused the references to tropical nature (and the gaudy, camp elements of the work) to be overlooked, although they do not necessarily contradict each other. The parrots, which I consider to be quintessential in order to understand *Tropicália* in all its complexity (for instance as decolonizing agents, as discussed further below, or alluding, in view of their vocal capacity, to the muting and censorship exerted by the military dictatorship), are not only absent from the installation view in Rio de Janeiro, but also from most of the research literature: they are listed as materials, but seldom considered more closely.[14]

In an interview given to the art critic Mário Barata one week after *Nova Objetividade Brasileira*, Oiticica described *Tropicália* as a complete success: he depicted the sensory experiences of the visitors who walked on sand and pebbles, looking for the hidden poems in the foliage, playing with the parrots—the atmosphere was "obviously tropical."[15] As the artist later noted, the idea consisted in seizing representations from the everyday in Brazil, opposing these motifs and their frivolous, outward Camp sensibility to the predominant "good taste" of the global North: "so, the Carmen Miranda imagery was rethought, for instance: all things that had been put aside by Brazilian bourgeois pride, anxious for European elegance: pineapples, plastic flowers, parrots, macaws, samba embroidery stuff, etc."[16]

However, the idea of *Tropicália* and its visual language was subsequently—much to the anguish of Oiticica—misunderstood in every conceivable way, dismissed by some as a reactionary backlash and ideologically coopted by the right-wing conservative military dictatorship.[17] With his tropical scenery, Oiticica addressed the problem of representation "in all its ambivalence," negotiating between the "exotic stereotype" and the need to design an aesthetics of one's own, entirely other than the aesthetics of the imperialist West, as Guy Brett later remarked; in other words, it was intended as a provocation and an attack on conventional value systems—however, the radical meaning was overlooked, "Tropicália" became a popular catchphrase and "only the images, the macaws and banana trees, were taken out and repeated ad nauseam."[18]

13 Glauber Rocha, "An Aesthetics of Hunger" (1965), in *On Cinema*, ed. Ismail Xavier, trans. Stephanie Dennison and Charlotte Smith (London: I.B. Tauris, 2019), 41–46.

14 Contrary to popular belief, the parrots in Rio de Janeiro were for instance not presented in a cage. See, among others, Christopher Dunn, "Mapping Tropicália," in *The Global Sixties in Sound and Vision: Media, Counterculture, Revolt*, ed. Timothy Scott Brown und Andrew Lison (New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2014), 29–42, 37, or Karl Posso, "An Ethics of Displaying Affection: Hélio Oiticica's Expressions of Joy and Togetherness," *Portuguese Studies* 29, no. 1 (2013), 44–77, 52.

15 Hélio Oiticica, "Depõe sobre Tropicália e Parangolés," *Jornal do Commercio*, Rio de Janeiro, May 21, 1967, archive Projeto Hélio Oiticica, Rio de Janeiro.

16 Hélio Oiticica, "Tropicália: The Image Problem Surpassed by That of a Synthesis," typewritten manuscript, Paris, May 31, 1969, archive Projeto Hélio Oiticica, Rio de Janeiro, 1. The artist later noted that *Tropicália* criticized the conservative cultivation of "good taste" and proposed to understand "things considered tacky" as constructive elements. Hélio Oiticica, "Brasil Diarreia," typewritten manuscript, Rio de Janeiro, February 5–10, 1970, online archive Programa Hélio Oiticica, PHO 0328/70, 3. On the notion of Camp, see Susan Sontag, "Notes on 'Camp'" [1964], in *Against Interpretation* (New York: Dell, 1969), 277–293.

17 After the 1950s' obsession with progress and the dismissal of traditions in the pursuit of modernity and internationality, in the 1960s, a return to previously marginalized, local forms of popular culture took place under the right-wing conservative military dictatorship.

18 Guy Brett, "Hélio Oiticica: Reverie and Revolt," *Art in America* 77, no. 1 (January 1989), 110–121/163/165, 117. Elsewhere, Brett described how the characteristic

The works that Oiticica later conceived in New York in the 1970s—many of them remained unrealized ideas but are described in notes and drawings—did away with the tropical elements of *Tropicália*. As becomes apparent in numerous writings of the artist from this period, he wanted to prevent the "Brazilian imagery" from being read abroad only in superficial appearance and refused to "represent" Brazil, as he noted in his contribution to the catalog of the *Information* show at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1970: "i am not here representing brazil; or representing anything else; the ideas of representing-representation-etc. are over."[19] Instead of colorful textiles with floral patterns, he now favored materials such as translucent nylon. Plants remained the only (tropical) element he continued to use sporadically, for example in *Rhodislandia* (1971).

As mentioned before, parrots have actually a lot to offer as agents of decolonization, if only one takes the time to look at them and consider their centuries-long depiction in relation to Brazil. They have been center stage in an embattled discourse on identity politics, being in turns imposed by the foreign colonial gaze and reclaimed by artists. In the early days of the colonial exploitation of the Americas, parrots became an important commodity since the European invaders initially discovered few raw materials. The macaws they found in the area of today's Brazil were not only larger and more colorful than the parrots of other regions of the world, but also very numerous.[20] On colonial world maps, they came to symbolize the Brazilian coast, which was also known as *Terra dos Papagaios*. Later depictions of Brazil from the colonial perspective continued to center around the representation of tropical nature, subliminally negotiating power relations and hegemonic claims. In these pictures, nature was likened to archaic "authenticity." The dangerous "green hell" was associated with the savagery and barbarism of the unfathomed stranger, while the representations of "primitive" ways of life in nature implied an inferior contrast to European culture.[21]

In the 1920s, parrots took on new meaning when they were claimed back—along with other images of the tropics—by the proponents of the anthropophagic movement. Instead of repressing the (stereotypical) images of nature associated with colonial imperialism, the Brazilian modernists decided to rather consume and digest them in a "cannibalistic" process.[22] Oiticica was obviously interested in this strategy of appropriation, since he borrowed motifs from

Brazilian vocabulary that Oiticica wanted to invoke with *Tropicália*, his use of materials such as sand, pebbles, parrots, plants and patterned fabrics were ultimately swallowed up by the "tropicalist wave" and standardized as a commodities, so that the artist had to rethink entirely his relationship to easily consumable images. Guy Brett, "The Experimental Exercise of Liberty," in *Hélio Oiticica*, published in conjunction with the exhibition at the Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art, Rotterdam, February 22–April 26, 1992, Galerie nationale du Jeu de Paume, Paris, June 8–August 23, 1992, Fundació Antoni Tàpies, Barcelona, October 1–December 6, 1992, Centre de Arte Moderna da Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, Lisbon, January 20–March 20, 1993, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, October 31, 1993–February 20, 1994 (Paris: Éditions du Jeu de Paume, 1992), 222–239, 230.

19 Hélio Oiticica, untitled text in *Information*, ed. Kynaston L. McShine, published in conjunction with the exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, July 2–September 20, 1970 (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1970), 103.

20 Renate Pieper, *Die Vermittlung einer neuen Welt: Amerika im Nachrichtennetz des Habsburgischen Imperiums 1493–1598* (Mainz: Verlag Philipp von Zabern, 2000), 248–252.

21 Sometimes tropical nature was staged as paradise, albeit never innocently, since the resources shown were unmistakably related to economic interests. On the geo-political construction of Latin America as a "modern/colonial foundation of racism," see Walter D. Mignolo, *The Idea of Latin America*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2005. For a discussion of ideology and landscape in relation to the rainforest, see, for instance, Candace Slater, *Entangled Edens: Visions of the Amazon*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001.

22 Oswald de Andrade, "The Cannibalist Manifesto" [1928], trans. Stephen Berg, *Third Text* 13, no. 46 (Spring 1999), 92–95.

colonial and modern European art.[23] He actually made an explicit reference to the anthropophagic movement in his construction plan for *Tropicália*, when he described that he would design a landscape with tropical plants and birds, the basic idea being to create an atmosphere similar to the paintings of Tarsila [do Amaral]—according to him the "first typical Brazilian painter."[24] (A parrot is in fact prominently depicted in one of her most famous paintings, *Vendedor de frutas* (Fruit Seller, 1925), now in the Gilberto Chateaubriand collection in the MAM-Rio. The bird rests on top of tropical fruits held by a figure lending the picture its title, who is either sitting in a far too small boat or carrying an oversized basket in the middle of water.[25])

In the 1940s, yet another parrot arose to represent Brazil, again imposed from outside. Though it was no longer entangled in the colonial past, the parrot that made its appearance in the context of the so-called "Good Neighborhood" policy of the USA was no less a political animal.[26] Walt Disney, who had traveled with a team to Mexico, Brazil and Argentina in 1941 to premier *Fantasia*, introduced a year later, in the episode film *Saludos Amigos!* (released in Brazil under the title *Alô Amigos!*), the figure of Zé Carioca: an anthropomorphic parrot in the colors of the Brazilian flag (the word *carioca* designates the residents of Rio de Janeiro). Zé Carioca is replete with clichés and negative stereotypes; his clothes—white jacket, bow tie and straw hat—refer to the figure of the *malandro*, a carefree bohemian who lives for the day, likes to dance and to seduce. Though Oiticica did not explicitly refer to this cartoon figure, an implicit nod can be assumed given its great popularity and especially in view of the artist's outward criticism of US cultural imperialism.

Around the same period he installed *Tropicália* for the second time, for his solo show at the Whitechapel gallery in London, Oiticica elaborated the notion of *Crelazer*—a combination of the words *criação* (creation), or *crer* (believe), and *lazer* (leisure), which he understood as a resolute critique of rest as a capitalist form of recreation, catering only to the sustenance and perpetuation of labor.[27] With *Crelazer*, Oiticica aimed to rethink the idea of leisure as an activity in its own right, rather than a mere counterpart to work. In a conversation with Guy Brett, published in *Studio International* shortly after the Whitechapel exhibition opened, Oiticica promoted the idea to pursue no entertainment intentions or seek any result in leisure, but to simply strive for the immediate enjoyment that arises from inner, "necessary desires" similar to approaching a fire in order to warm oneself.[28] Pointing out how in the modern Western

23 Oiticica later stated that the central, labyrinthine *Penetrável* in *Tropicália*, its various haptic-sensory experiences and the constantly running television, induced the feeling of being devoured; in his opinion, it was "the most anthropophagic work of Brazilian art." Hélio Oiticica, "Tropicália" (March 4, 1968), first published in *Folha de São Paulo*, January 8, 1984, first translated into English in *Hélio Oiticica*, exh. cat. Rotterdam et al., 124–125.

24 Hélio Oiticica, "Tropicália (Planos para construção)," handwritten note, April 16, 1967, online archive Programa Hélio Oiticica, PHO 0321/67.

25 In the left background there is a white building with two towers on a hill, presumably a colonial church, while on the right you can see a low one-story modernist building and royal palms—a recurring motif in the work of do Amaral, who engaged with questions of nature protection and criticized the profit orientation of agriculture. See, for instance, her article "Forests," published by the newspaper *Diário de São Paulo* on March 30, 1939, reprinted in an English translation in *Tarsila do Amaral*, published in conjunction with the exhibition at the Fundación Juan March, Madrid, February 6–May 3, 2009 (Madrid: Fundación Juan March, 2009), 218.

26 The Good Neighborhood Policy marks a paradigm shift in US foreign policy from 1933 onwards, aiming at an increased cooperation with its neighboring countries. The program was accompanied by cultural measures to legitimize its predominantly political and economic intentions.

27 Oiticica intentionally left the exact origin of the word open, noting: "Is *Creleisure* creation of leisure or belief in leisure?—I don't know, maybe both, maybe neither." Hélio Oiticica, "Creleisure" (1969), in *Hélio Oiticica*, exh. cat. Rotterdam et al., 132–133, 132.

28 Hélio Oiticica, "Oiticica Talks to Guy Brett," *Studio International* 177, no. 909 (March 1969), 134.

Figure 3:
Hélio Oiticica, *Tropicália*, 1969. Installation view, Whitechapel Gallery, London. © Projeto Hélio Oiticica archive, Rio de Janeiro.

world, "leisure is not used for its own sake, but to make *work* more bearable," Oiticica wanted the visitors of his exhibition to "lose the idea of work and leisure hours."[29] In another statement for the magazine *Art & Artists*, Oiticica expanded some of these aspects and concluded with explicit allusions to recreational drug use as part of the idea—something he would revisit in later works, such as the *Cosmococa* slide show installations of 1973.[30]

Brett later observed how Oiticica was aware at the time that he might expose himself to criticism with such statements, and that his proposal would possibly be considered utopian or naive.[31] Indeed, a sarcastic review of the Whitechapel show titled "Gritty & Grotty" ridiculed the notion of *Crelazer* as "an attempt to induce us to squeeze arty sensations out of innocuous activities," remarking that the exhibition may function as a playground for children, but otherwise left nothing else behind than a shabby impression.[32] Various reviews actually emphasized the presence of children and young people within the exhibition, and discussed how they interacted with the work.[33] The topos of children's play (and the insinuation that such a thing could not to be taken seriously within an art context) ran through different reviews. An article titled "Whitechapel Wonderland" noted, for example, that the exhibition was no artistic breakthrough, but at least a good pastime free of charge, where visitors could have fun in the sand, relax in a tent or play billiards.[34] Likewise, the correspondent of the *Frankfurter Rundschau* had little use for the notion of leisure and play in the context of an exhibition: "In addition to the programmatic term 'participation,' all sorts of Portuguese words and aesthetic phrases are cited, but they cannot hide the fact that the pretty playground... is built on sand."[35] And the critic for *Arts Review* ended with the withering comment: "It seemed to me like a sophisticated modern nursery school, encouraging the enjoyment of various tactile and other sensations for adult participants; as yet, it seemed to have no further significance."[36]

While almost all reviews of the Whitechapel exhibition derided its playful aspects, hardly any dealt with the possibility of a concurrent political reading of participation and play—despite the social context of the time, in view of the global uprisings of the late 1960s and more specifically to the situation in Brazil, with an oppressive military dictatorship in place that forced many artists out of the country.[37] One review even

29 Ibid.

30 Hélio Oiticica, "On the Discovery of Creleisure," *Art & Artists* (April 1969). Oiticica insisted that the decision to get involved in the experiment was entirely optional—the possibility *not* to participate being just as important. Ibid. On the *Cosmococa* series, a collaboration with Neville D'Almeida exhibited only after the death of Oiticica, see in particular Sabeth Buchmann and Max Jorge Hinderer Cruz, *Hélio Oiticica and Neville D'Almeida: Block-Experiments in Cosmococa—program in progress*, (London: Afterall, 2013).

31 Brett, "The Experimental Exercise of Liberty," 232.

32 Robert Melville, "Gritty & Grotty," *New Statesman*, March 14, 1969, 385–386, 386. All press cuttings of the exhibition are courtesy of the Whitechapel Gallery archive.

33 "Walking Through Sand and Playing Billiards at the Art Gallery," *East London Advertiser*, February 28, 1969, 36; Norbert Lynton, "Bare Landscape; An Invitation to Play," *The Guardian*, March 12, 1969, 6; Michael Ayrton, "A Brain in Armour," *New Statesman*, April 11, 1969, 523. In this context, it is noteworthy that children and young people are also depicted in some exhibition views. See, for example, "Sand Underfoot at This Art Gallery," *East London Advertiser*, March 7, 1969.

34 "Whitechapel Wonderland," *Morning Telegraph*, February 27, 1969.

35 Julian Exner, "Apfelzimmer, Pastellbohlen, Sandgefühl," *Frankfurter Rundschau*, March 8, 1969.

36 Marina Vaizey, "Helio Oiticica: Whitechapel Art Gallery," *Arts Review* 21, no. 5 (March 15, 1969), 147.

37 One particular report expounded how, according to the artist, "Tropicália" was a movement of insurgency in art, music and politics in Brazil, but showed skepticism as to whether this claim could withstand the British context: Oiticica's objects and installations were "interesting" but not particularly revolutionary, neither in a political nor an aesthetic sense. "How to be a rebel," *Daily Mirror*, February 24, 1969, 15. The only review that granted the exhibition some political dimension interpreted the transience of Oiticica's objects, concepts and installations as a reference to the inconsistency of life and human needs. Charles Spencer, "Private View: Caro and Oiticica—Object and Environment," *Art & Artists* (April 1969), 4.

accused Oiticica of escapism: "We are clearly at the far end of the art spectrum whose other extremity turns out factory-made cubes designed by a computer. We are invited to shed such metropolitan gloss and return to a state of rustic innocence—rusticity here comprising Brazilian fringe-housing. We are back once more in Rousseau's primitive purity, in Gauguin's lotus-land, in the scene which shimmers at the end of the hippie's rainbow, the blessed isles of the cultural drop-out."[38] (The Cambridge Dictionary online defines Lotus Land as "a pleasant place where people need only think about enjoying themselves, not about work or achieving anything."[39] The term refers to the Land of the Lotus-eaters in the *Odyssey*.)

Possibly overwhelmed by too much "otherness," most critics failed to recognize the political dimension of this work and granted no criticality to the living birds either, even though, judging from the reviews, they were among the most striking features of the exhibition (aside from the sand on the floor in the section that had to be entered barefoot). A majority of the articles did mention their presence. The review in *The Times*, for instance, described how "the first impression is of vaguely tropical images—two live macaws, meditative in their cage contributing [to this impression]," though surprisingly the parrots were mostly not enumerated among the playful elements of the show, but rather set in contrast to the joyful visitors.[40] Along these lines, the *Arts Review* article described how "two rather gloomy parrots survey the proceedings in the *Tropicalia* section," while others pointed out that the parrots were "speechless," described them as "grumpy," or reported on the cage with the two "bedraggled-looking" parrots.[41] Yet precisely these desolate, caged birds pointed to the possibility for a political reading of the work. For this second iteration of *Tropicália* in London, they were not macaws from the Amazon anymore, but parakeets (fig. 3).[42] They lost the explicit link to the colonial exploitation of Brazil outlined above, being no longer birds that related to a specific location (or if any, to the nearest pet shop at most); yet in the course of this generalization, they also acquired a new critical potential. As living animals confined in a cage, they alluded to issues of alterity and exile within a migrant metropolis—though this semantic level was crudely overlooked.

Given their ability to vocalize, couldn't the parrots in *Tropicália* be understood as a reference to the censorship of the military dictatorship that was in power in Brazil at the time? Couldn't they be said to have some sort of agency as fairly subversive elements in a museum, in spite of being domesticated and held captive? After all, they embodied resistance as a nuisance in the institutional setting: not only by requiring feeding and care, but also making noise, soiling the museum floor and possibly exuding objectionable odors. Being two, they further constituted a kind of community, a nucleus of potential resistance that might even continue to expand. (In the wild, macaws usually gather in large flocks.)

Oiticica himself noted how "the myth of 'tropicality' is much more than parrots and banana trees: it is the consciousness

38 Nigel Gosling, "Lotus-Land, East London," *The Observer*, March 9, 1969. According to the same review, Oiticica's show was a "hyper-sophisticated escapist playground" in a poverty-stricken district of London and thereby both inappropriate and shameful; "there's a time and a place even for dreams," the author concluded. Ibid.

39 https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/lotus-land (accessed May 31, 2020).

40 "Participation at Whitechapel," *The Times*, London, March 10, 1969. See also the untitled note in *Hampstead & Highgate Express*, February 28, 1969, and Paul Overy, "Cabins," *The Listener*, March 6, 1969.

41 Vaizey, "Helio Oiticica," 147; "Walking Through Sand," 36; Edwin Mullins, "This Other—and Unnecessary—Eden," *The Sunday Telegraph*, March 9, 1969; Ian Dunlop, "You can even paddle at this show!," *Evening Standard*, March 3, 1969, 16.

42 See also the images in Oiticica, "On the Discovery," and in Charles Spencer, "Lettera da Londra," *Qui arte contemporanea*, no. 6 (September 1969), 52–56, 54.

of not being conditioned by established structures, hence highly revolutionary in its entirety."[43] Oiticica did not distance himself categorically from the "parrots and banana trees," nor deny them any political dimension—he was only critical of an ideological appropriation of "Tropicalism" as an "ultra-superficial image for consumption."[44] (In fact, the very "idea of a new 'ism'" was "already a distortion" of the idea behind *Tropicália*, as he noted in the *Information* catalog.[45]) Oiticica's parrots, the Carmen Miranda imagery, plastic flowers and samba embroidery, and the notion of *Crelazer* emerged from a position of resistance, in response to a state of oppression under the military dictatorship in Brazil, but also to the hegemony of the Global North's values and aesthetics, insisting on a Camp sensibility and the state of being Other as a decolonial means, and as an aesthetic of liberation.

As feminist philosopher Petra Van Brabandt points out, "our self-esteem as constituted by hard working is at stake; and this is why we resent the lazy, those who resist joining in the apology of work."[46] It should therefore come as no surprise that the birds, along with all the tropical elements of the work, and Oiticica's "proposition for non-repressive leisure" were largely excluded from the reception of *Tropicália*, or at any rate, were not taken seriously in their political dimension.[47] Laziness can be a way to defy the 24/7 productivity diktat. Along these lines, play can become a form of resistance too. By indulging in play and games, birds and children can embody such resistance, sabotaging the idea of production for the benefit of reproduction and care. Confusing our work ethics and reminding us of other ways of being and living, their presence in a museum (or in a home turned into a home office) can be distracting and inconvenient—which is precisely what makes them so precious.

43 Oiticica, "Tropicália," 124–125.

44 Ibid. As Oiticica pointed out elsewhere, folklore might be reactionary as a concept, but it does not necessarily follow that all folkloristic elements are reactionary—"it depends why or by whom or what for" they are used. Oiticica, "The Image Problem," 2.

45 Oiticica, *Information*, 103.

46 Petra Van Brabandt, "Laziness Cures Resentment," in *Sleep Cures Sleepiness*, ed. Martin Kohout (Berlin: TLTRPreß, 2014), 1.1–1.6. I would like to thank Marco Pezzotta from the artist collective Real Madrid for pointing out this publication to me and generously gifting me his own copy.

47 Hélio Oiticica, "The Senses Pointing Towards a New Transformation" (June 1969), unpublished manuscript, AHO/PHO 0486.69, 3.

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